

## The Economic Impacts of Zoos

In 2019, “The 215 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in the U.S.... [brought in] over 212,000 jobs, generating \$24 billion [to the economy]...” (*AZA*). Aside from benefiting animals, zoos play an important role in enhancing our communities and economy. The most common source of income for zoos is provided by paying visitors with some government assistance. However, these forms of revenue are insufficient as zoos are sensitive to fluctuations. Zoos have been facing financial problems for years and the Coronavirus has only made things worse. One consistent issue that decreases zoos’ revenue is the backlash they receive from animal activists, who believe that zoos prioritize profits over animal welfare. According to Dale Jamieson, professor of Environmental Studies at New York University, “[A]lthough providing amusement for people... [is] a very important function of zoos, it is hard to see how providing such amusement could possibly justify keeping wild animals in captivity” (42). But this view that zoos exploit their animals does not fit all the facts. Some zoos do not have adequate funding to improve, which holds them back from reaching their potential. In order to enhance zoos, they should receive more funding as they provide jobs, support their communities and the economy.

To understand the impacts caused by zoos, one must understand how zoos receive and spend their earnings. According to the Houston Zoo, a non-profit organization, they acquired their revenue from contributions, admission and membership fees, city management fee, and concession payments totaling \$101 million (“Financial Statements and Independent Auditors’ Report...” 29). The majority of profits are derived from the public, demonstrating this mutual relationship between the community and zoos. The community provides funding through

donations, admissions, and other sales, while zoos provide entertainment in return. With this earned money, the majority of expenses went to maintain the animals and the facility. The Houston Zoo Inc. financial statements report that nearly \$50 million was spent on animal and exhibit operations, depreciation, education and conservation programs, management and general, and fundraising (4). This shows how zoos must maintain an equal balance between satisfying their animals and visitors. Zoos rely on foot traffic to have a steady income. The Houston Zoo Inc. demonstrates this concept as they have experienced a boost of 385% in their total revenue as a result of the 49% increase in visitors since 2003 (*2018 Annual Report* 28). As a consequence of this method, zoos must entertain their visitors, which can vary in great abundance or struggling months.

The Detroit Zoo's income is similar as most of it was earned through the public. The Detroit Zoological Society, a non-profit organization, earned its revenue of \$45 million from admissions, parking and rentals, government support, and contributions ("Financial Statements Years..." 4). This reveals how zoos depend on public support, regardless of their size. Indeed, both zoos receive some assistance from the government, but they cannot rely on these funds. The fact this assistance is needed demonstrates how the money they earn is not enough to maintain their facilities. According to the Detroit Zoo's *2018 Annual Report*, their operating expenses resulted in mainly animal care, maintenance, park operations, management and administrative, education, and fundraising totaling \$46.8 million (36). This report coincides with the Houston Zoo strengthening the need to satisfy their visitors. These non-profit zoos rely heavily on their millions of visitors to pay for necessities such as food, water, and care. However, improving zoos is no small task as they still need additional support.

While these operating expenses seem relatively small, they have significantly impacted the surrounding communities. John Antel, University of Houston Hobby School of Public Policy, reports, “The Houston Zoo contributed [\$242.4 million] to the Houston-Woodlands-Sugarland Metropolitan area... [creating 1,925 jobs and generating \$73.1 million] to household earnings...”

(1). This report explains how the zoo directly benefited its community by supporting its local suppliers and employees. The zoo purchases its food directly from local farms reinforcing this mutual bond between the zoos and community (Antel). The Detroit Zoological Society impacted its local economy with more than \$167.6 million, “supporting 1,916 full and part-time jobs [with over] \$65 million in wages and benefits” (*2018 Annual Report* 37). This significant impact while also coming from local suppliers came through the attraction of visitors outside of the area.

Families and individuals visiting outside the local area require places to stay, eat, and fuel which aids other attractions and businesses (Detroit Zoological Society 2019). Economic benefits could increase further if they had more support from the public. John Antel states, “Looking at the years 2013 to 2022, actual and proposed Zoo capital spending will contribute [\$524.9 million] to local output” (2). This increasing support from the public would create more jobs, household earnings, and impact the other goods and services within the district (Antel). While these numbers show the importance of zoos to the economy, many activists do not think studies justify displaying animals for income.

Most anti-zoo people are concerned about generalizing zoos as harmful rather than helping them improve. Jessica Pierce and Marc Bekoff, Center for Bioethics and Humanities, discuss the option of closing down these “bad zoos” as a way to reform them. “Bad zoos” refers to zoos that fall short of meeting guidelines and who take advantage of their animals. They quote

Benard Harrison, past director of the Singapore Zoo, ““If I could, I would shut down 90% of the 10,000 zoos in the world....”” (45). Although a handful of zoos are considered “bad” based on their practices, not all zoos are as harmful. There are “good” zoos that follow the correct regulations and deserve the proper support and recognition. Closing zoos down will not only affect our economy but the animals as well. Terry Tang, associated press, confirms how alarming animal welfare has become since the pandemic started. He stresses, “The Phoenix Zoo, a \$1 million-a-month operation, has been losing \$80,000 a day since shutting [down on] March 18...” (Tang). This financial squeeze has caused the zoo to seek help from social media by live-streaming their animals. Although they have earned thousands of dollars, they still were forced to set an emergency fund (Tang). Freelance writer Melanie Peeples explains, “The Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden is raising money by selling newly-designed T-shirts featuring its star hippo...” The lack of funds pre-pandemic has led zoos to create clever ways of raising money. Even during this epidemic, zoos are still heavily dependent on the community’s support to supply their animals with food, water, and veterinary care.

While the ethics of zoos can be argued, they undeniably need more support to protect their animals. Museums and stores can close down when having financial difficulties, yet zoos cannot as they have live animals that need to be cared for. If a zoo does close down, it could take months or even years to relocate animals into a safe environment. The animals born and raised in zoos and whose habitat has been destroyed would be harder to relocate, but eventually would be placed in sanctuaries. This demonstrates the important role zoos provide for animals - the role of protection. The best way to move forward is to improve zoos, which can be done with more support. Assisting zoos with donations or visits could effectively help zoos call for and claim

support from the government. Meanwhile, zoos that have adapted to new techniques to sustain their animals should continue these methods. These methods such as virtual gatherings, merchandise, and donations can be used and adapted post-pandemic.

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